

The Critical Legacy of Oscar Wilde

Author(s): Zhang Longxi

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Writing in *Vanity Fair*, 2 March 1905, Max Beerbohm noted the coincidence of an exhibition of Whistler's paintings and the publication of a book by Oscar Wilde in the previous week in London, and how suddenly everybody was talking about the greatness of these two men. "Whistler during the 'seventies and 'eighties," observes Beerbohm, "and Oscar Wilde during the 'eighties and early 'nineties, cut very prominent figures in London; and both were by the critics and the gossips regarded merely as clever *farceurs*. Both, apart from their prominence, were doing serious work; but neither was taken at all seriously."[1] The apostles of aestheticism struck most of their contemporaries as eccentric creatures, foppishly dressed, and ridiculously affected in their "medieval" manners, for which they were so effectively satirized in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*. However, "if *Patience* exposed to Philistine laughter their obvious mannerism," as Jerome H. Buckley points out, "it left untouched the first principles of art for art's sake."[2]

Most critics and scholars have either overlooked those principles, brilliantly formulated in Wilde's critical essays in *Intentions*, looked upon them with deep suspicion, or regarded them with condescending tolerance. Even today, as Richard Ellman remarks, the mere mention of the name of Oscar Wilde creates the anticipation that "what will be quoted as his will turn conventional solemnities to frivolous insights."[3] As a writer of witty, elegant, and truly delightful comedies and a number of charming fairy tales, Wilde is familiar to the public and the average reader, but as a most articulate and serious theoretician of aesthetic criticism, he has very seldom, until quite recently, been taken seriously.

It is the purpose of this essay to examine some responses to Oscar Wilde as a critic and some significant reevaluations of his critical theory in the perspective of contemporary criticism. No exhaustive survey has been attempted, but I hope to show that the critical legacy of Oscar Wilde, which has so long been unduly rejected or neglected, is more profound than has hitherto been

recognized and deserves far more attention than it has yet received.

René Wellek's *History of Modern Criticism* has a chapter on the "English Aesthetic Movement," in which he discusses Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater, but not Wilde. The section on Wilde comes under the chapter heading of "Other English Critics," which includes, besides Wilde, J. A. Symonds, George Saintsbury, and G. B. Shaw. Wellek begins his discussion of Wilde with a kind of demythologization of Wilde's pathetic self-image, elaborately built up in *De Profundis*, as the crucified martyr of aestheticism. And yet, it is this "myth or legend," says Wellek, that "gives to Wilde's ideas on art and literature a historical position which they may not deserve in a history of criticism, apart from the personality and the pitiful fate of the man."[4] This highly patronizing note sets the tone of Wellek's discussion in a way that insufficiently acknowledges the independent value of Wilde's thought.

Wellek traces Wilde's ideas to Pater, Swinburne, Arnold, Gautier, Baudelaire, and Poe. He finds nothing original: even *Intentions*, the collection of Wilde's later dialogues and essays, "merely restates with greater brilliance and wit the main ideas he had absorbed from Pater."[5] Though Wellek concedes that Wilde's prose displays some solid brain-work, an ingenious play of mind, and a quick grasp of many verities, he blames Wilde for disconcertingly shifting "between three often divergent views: panaestheticism, the autonomy of art, and a decorative formalism. He does not hold his vision steady."[6] This shifting of views or inconsistency is nevertheless more a problem with Wellek the historian of criticism, who tries to characterize Wilde in terms of neatly defined categories within a coherent theoretical frame, than with Wilde himself, who protests, in his typically paradoxical way, "Who wants to be consistent? . . . Not I. Like Emerson, I write over the door of my library the word 'Whim.' " Wilde further insists "that each mode of criticism is, in its highest development, simply a mood, and that we are never more true to ourselves than when we are inconsistent."[7]

The real difficulty Wilde's ideas present to Wellek is the controversial notion of creative criticism that forms the center of Wilde's long essay, "The Critic as Artist." Wilde maintains that "the highest Criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation" (138); that it is "the only civilized form of autobiography" (139); and that "it treats the work of art simply as a starting point for a new creation" (142). In Wellek's eyes, however, this claim of higher creativity "goes beyond the demands of sympathy," for it confuses criticism with creation and misleads the critic "in the direction of irresponsible subjectivity."[8]

He summarily dismisses all such criticism: "If we are concerned with criticism as organized knowledge, as interpretation and judgment of publicly verifiable objects, we must dismiss poetic criticism as an irrelevancy. Today the Mona Lisa passage in Pater, the ostentatious fireworks of Swinburne's eloquence, and even the charming reflections of Anatole France have lost their appeal and are no present danger."[9] However, "today" in this passage meant the 1960s and has now faded into a yesterday. In the 1970s and 1980s, much to his surprise and displeasure, Wellek sees in the more recent trends of literary theory—deconstruction, *Rezeptionsästhetik*, and reader-response criticism—a dangerous revival of "the idea of 'creative criticism' propagated by Oscar Wilde," for they go even further to obliterate the distinction between criticism and fiction, turning everything into an irresponsible play of language, and finally "spell the breakdown or even the abolition of all traditional literary scholarship and teaching."[10]

This rather gloomy prognosis of the destruction of literary studies by contemporary criticism sounds ironically like Wilde's own prophecy perversely fulfilled. "It is to criticism that the future belongs," Wilde declares. "If creation is to last at all, it can only do so on the condition of becoming far more critical than it is at present" (206–07). Some critics lament that this is precisely what is happening today, that "a literal usurpation has begun which would depose literature and grant sovereign authority to one or more of several competing disciplines."[11] The crisis today concerns the very concept and nature of criticism, and the anger with which Wellek views much of contemporary theory comes presumably from his awareness that his own concept of criticism, which fifty years ago was regarded as so radical that it was attacked by traditionalists as the destruction of literary studies, is now regarded as old-fashioned by the younger generation of critics. "I sometimes feel guilty," says Wellek in a tone which sounds at once apologetic and complacent, "of having helped to propagate the theory of literature. Since my book, theory has triumphed in this country and has, possibly, triumphed with a vengeance."[12] However, Wellek's sense of guilt perhaps does not reveal so much the triumph of theory in general as the aging of a particular kind of theory that he has ironically helped to propagate.

Wellek is, of course, not alone in attacking creative criticism. It seems an idea long taken for granted, though logically not impeccable, that criticism as commentary or *explication de texte* arises after and because of the primary text of literature: *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. Murray Krieger puts it clearly when he calls criticism a secondary art and asserts that the verbal artifact of the critics

"finds its starting point where another verbal artifact has left off, and that the latter is prior both temporally and authoritatively to what they write *about* it."[13] Temporally, yes. But is the artist's verbal artifact also authoritatively prior to that of the critic? Wilde would certainly disagree. "I am always amused," says Wilde through his mouthpiece Gilbert, "by the silly vanity of those writers and artists of our day who seem to imagine that the primary function of the critic is to chatter about their second-rate work" (139). Of course, Krieger would contend that "I have deliberately overstated the case, using my rhetoric to urge the presence of a fetishizing motive for criticism as commentary on a sacred text, as allegory for an ultimately unspeakable symbol."[14] Nevertheless, the model of a sacred text's relation to its commentary is not fully relevant here. It would be rather naive to imagine that the power or authority of institutionalized religion comes exclusively from the text of scripture, for the history of biblical interpretation shows that allegoresis as a method was taken over from the reading of literature, notably the Homeric epics, to the exegesis of the Bible, and that the authority of scripture is as much the authority of interpretation as that of the biblical text itself. Karlfried Froehlich argues convincingly that a careful study of patristic hermeneutics will show, "on the one hand, how biblical language determined theology and, on the other, how theological presuppositions shaped the reading of the Bible. It was in the hermeneutical circle of biblical text, tradition, and interpretation that Christian theology as a whole took shape."[15] In the history of religion as well as of literature, the canonicity of what Krieger calls "the original master text" is established by none other than the commentators, interpreters, and critics. It is the hermeneutical-critical tradition that has shaped the canon of texts as well as our understanding of it. As Wilde points out, "An appreciation of Milton is . . . the reward of consummate scholarship" (154). Now we can no longer believe in the myth of a self-sufficient text, and it is precisely a fruitful study of biblical hermeneutics and its implications for literary criticism that has contributed to the expansion of our horizon for looking at the complexity of textual meanings.

The essential problem with Wilde's critics, however, is condemnation of creative criticism without proper attention to Wilde's ideas and expositions. The dialogues on art and criticism in *Intentions* have a coherent and symmetrical structure. "The Decay of Lying" posits, among other things, the bold creed of the new aesthetics: that "Life imitates art far more that Art imitates life" (32); that "Life holds the Mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some strange type imagined by painter or sculptor, or realizes in fact what has been dreamed in fiction" (39). This not only refers to the fact that

fashionable ladies in the 1880s tried to dress and look like the beautiful figures in the paintings of Rossetti or Burne-Jones, but to a far more profound truth that art helps to shape our own vision of the reality of life and nature and that we see things only as we have first created them. Wilde's discussion of landscape painting is quite illuminating, for where, if not in landscape paintings, in Rousseau and romantic literature, did Europe first discover the beauty of nature? "Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master, do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn to faint forms of fading grace curved bridge and swaying barge?" (40). When you come to the window and look at the glorious evening sky, what do you see but "a very second-rate Turner?" (42). Wilde further develops this paradoxical argument into an advocacy of form in "The Critic as Artist." He asserts that, from the artistic point of view, life is a failure, but art imposes form on the chaos of life and miraculously turns its raw material into things eternally beautiful.

This part of Wilde's argument is not so difficult for his critics to accept: Wellek does so by identifying it as "only an overstatement of old classical ideas on the function of art as idealization."[16] In this way he is able to reconcile it with the classical and more rational concept of art. Yet this reconciliation becomes problematic when we remember Wilde's remark that "all bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals" (54). It seems to me that Henri Peyre, though not so sympathetic with Wilde's views, understands Wilde more appropriately when he says that "Oscar Wilde's famous and easy paradox is at bottom truer than he himself suspected: literature seldom imitates life with serious profit, but life imitates literature. We see today with the eyes of Gauguin and Cézanne; we love like Proust's heroes (only a little more normally); we swear and drink like Hemingway's characters, and some of us perhaps eat like the heroes of Thomas Wolfe."[17] That may be a bit exaggerated, but it does share Wilde's idea that both our perception and conception of nature are shaped by what we have created in art.

Wilde takes Japan as an example and argues that Japan and the Japanese as presented in art are pure inventions; they are the effect of artistic representation. In this argument, Eugenio Donato finds some germs of the poststructuralist understanding that "representation cannot function without generating within itself the pseudo-presence of an 'object.' This 'object,' however, is secondary and derived with respect to the play of representation." He compares

this with Flaubert's realization that art is illusion and aligns Wilde with Alexandre Kojève, Roland Barthes, and Martin Heidegger, who all "make of Japan an allegory for the problematics of form in general."[18] Wilde is certainly not speaking only for the nineteenth century when he says that "things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us" (41).

Here a suggestion of the famous epistemological principle of Vico's *New Science*, that of *verum factum*, is quite irresistible, even though no connection whatever between Wilde and Vico could have existed. In his anti-Cartesian view of history, Vico maintains that our knowledge of history or the humanities is on a higher level than that of natural sciences, for we can only know what we have created, and we know history better because history is made by man. The criterion of truth, Vico argues, cannot be the Cartesian *cogito* but the convertibility of the true and the made. The founders of civilizations are called, in the Greek sense of the word "poets"; that is, makers of history and of human institutions, who are endowed with "poetic wisdom" and whose fables and myths register their knowledge in poetic forms no less accurately than does modern rational philosophy. Those "poets" create according to their experiences and ideas; "what Aristotle [*On the Soul* 432a 7f] said of the individual man is therefore true of the race in general: *Nihil est in intellectu quin prius fuerit in sensu*. That is, the human mind does not understand anything of which it has had no previous impression (which our modern metaphysicians call 'occasion') from the senses."[19] Therefore, nothing can be known to man unless it is experienced, and nothing makes sense unless it is accommodated to the shape of the human mind which, in its own way, is shaping the world and our experience of it. Needless to say, Wilde does not have, nor did he intend to propose, a systematic philosophical treatment, comparable with Vico's, of the relation between knowledge and creation. What is relevent here is just the indication of some similarity between Wilde's idea of creative criticism and Vico's fundamental idea of truth as our own making. Both of them emphasize that what we see as true has much to do with what we are and what we do, and that art plays a far more active role in shaping our mind and life than we usually think it does.

But Wilde calls art lying, not truth: "Lying and poetry are arts—arts, as Plato saw, not unconnected with each other" (9), and "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art" (55). We all know that Plato attacked poetry as untruth thrice removed from the reality of Ideas and that Sir Philip Sidney's and numerous other apologetics for poetry have striven for a defense

since the Renaissance. Sidney's *Apology* is of special significance here because he, like Vico, emphasizes the meaning of poet as maker who creates, like God his own Maker, *ex nihilo*, "goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit."[20] To the charge of lying, Sidney rebuts that if to lie is to affirm as true what is actually false, then the poet "nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth"; he "never maketh any circles about your imagination to conjure you to believe for true what he writes," but overtly admits that he speaks "not affirmatively but allegorically and figuratively."[21] In other words, the overt fictionality of poetry is sufficient evidence to acquit the poet of any charge of lying.

It is quite characteristic of Wilde that, by deliberately calling the poet's overt fictionality lying, he joins Sidney in the long apologetic tradition in an ironical way, turning the opposition of truth and fiction into a paradox and an aphorism. There is perhaps something of an echo of Sidney in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* where Wilde asserts that "no artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved." His idea of life imitating art does not necessarily mean a total rejection of the old Greek notion of mimesis: he is not contradicting Aristotle, but the kind of sterile realism or naturalism as exemplified by Zola's works. As John Allen Quintus argues, "Wilde appears to be countering nineteenth-century notions about art more than he is challenging or rethinking ancient formulations," though his celebration of art as "untruth" does attest to "Wilde's interest in overturning the ancient philosopher."[22] In any case, if literature is nothing but fiction and if a work of art does not refer to the outside world for verification, to call art lying would indeed be less puzzling than it seems. "After all, what is a fine lie?" asks Wilde, and he himself gives the answer, "Simply that which is its own evidence" (6).

If "The Decay of Lying" expounds the idea of life imitating art, this idea is then paralleled by that of creative criticism set forth in "The Critic as Artist" where Wilde maintains that if we understand nature and life through art, then we understand art through criticism. According to Wilde's argument, we learn to appreciate the glorious sky at sunset because of Turner, but we admire Turner because Ruskin has taught us how to understand his paintings; we adore the Italian beauty because of da Vinci, but we see Mona Lisa and the beauty of her mysterious smile because Pater's insight has opened our eyes. Just as life provides the artist with materials for creative work, so the work of art provides the critic with materials for a higher creation. We see life through art, and we see art through criticism. This double perspective certainly gives Wilde's argument

a coherent and symmetrical structure, even though the argument may seem paradoxical, shocking, perverse or exasperating, depending on how you see it and where you stand. In this double perspective, Wilde is able to see criticism as "a creation within a creation" (138), for "the critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticises as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought" (136–37). Wilde further argues that the mere creative instinct only reproduces, and it is criticism that best incarnates the creative spirit: "Creation is always behind the age. It is Criticism that leads us. The Critical Spirit and the World-Spirit are one" (215). No matter how pretentious this may sound, Wilde's argument is not without its rhyme and reason. As W. K. Wimsatt observes, this theory is "a logical enough outcome of the original paradox of art for art's sake," an inevitable result of Wilde's double perspective: "If nature, reversing our usual conceptions, is to imitate art, then art, continuing the direction of reference, may well imitate criticism."[23] As we shall see, this theory, which seemed too shocking to be taken seriously a hundred years ago, contains many ideas that are remarkably congenial to contemporary critical theories.

Northrop Frye regards *The Decay of Lying* as "the beginning of a new kind of criticism" and Wilde as "clearly the herald of a new age in literature" because, by calling art a form of lying, Wilde anticipates the modern awareness of imaginative literature as "turning away from the descriptive use of language and the correspondence form of truth."[24] Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* is an attempt to establish criticism as a systematic and scientific study of literature within a specific conceptual framework, "a structure of thought and knowledge existing in its own right, with some measure of independence from the art it deals with."[25] Any claim of independence has of course to rest on the concept of autonomy, and both Wilde and Frye argue that criticism as systematic study of literature has to be distinguished from literature itself. Though Frye would reject the kind of impressionistic approach Wilde advocates, he certainly shares Wilde's idea that criticism should be independent not only of moral, political, and other imposed critical attitudes but of the work and its author. "Who cares whether Mr. Ruskin's views on Turner are sound or not? What does it matter?" asks Wilde rather bluntly (140). "Who, again, cares whether Mr. Pater has put into the portrait of Monna [*sic*] Lisa something that Lionardo [*sic*] never dreamed of?" (141). Criticism "treats the work of art simply as a starting point for a new creation. It does not confine itself—let us at least suppose so for the moment—to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final" (142).

Here Wilde clearly anticipates what Wimsatt and Beardsley later call the intentional fallacy, which confuses the poem with its origin and takes the *cause* of a poem for "a *standard* by which the critic is to judge the worth of the poet's performance."[26] Frye also dismisses authorial intention by arguing that only "criticism can talk, and all the arts are dumb": "not that the poet does not know what he is talking about, but that he cannot talk about what he knows."[27] The poet, Wilde says, cannot be a good critic because his artistic temperament is too strong to appreciate anything different from his own: "a really great artist can never judge of other people's work at all, and can hardly, in fact, judge his own" (204). Here again, we find him adumbrating Frye's argument that "what is true of the poet in relation to his own work is still more true of his opinion of other poets. It is hardly possible for the critical poet to avoid expanding his own tastes, which are intimately linked to his own practice, into a general law of literature."[28]

But Wilde's idea goes much further than the famous intentional fallacy of the New Critics and even further than Frye, for Wilde conceives of criticism as purely subjective, whereas Wimsatt and Beardsley are committed to the literary work as an ontological object and complain that, as a result of the intentional or the affective fallacy, "the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear."[29] For Wilde, however, the poem might as well profitably disappear in the critic's higher creation. He believes that Arnold's idea of the aim of criticism—to see the object as it really is— is "a very serious error," for it "takes no cognizance of Criticism's most perfect form, which is in its essence purely subjective" (140). Indeed, he goes even so far as to declare that the critic's work "need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticises" (145). In this unabashed plea for creative subjectivity, Wilde seems almost to lead to something like Roland Barthes's radical pronouncement of "the death of the Author," namely, that the liberated critic is engaged not in deciphering the authorial intention as the final signified but in working his or her own way in a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash."[30] Thus the critic participates in the traversing of that space with his or her own writing, which is no less original than that of the artist, producing a personal text as creative as literature itself.

Frye's mythological or archetypal criticism is based on the notion of literature as "a 'displaced' mythology," a structure of perennial and recurring myths, images, and archetypes that connect individual works with one another to form a tradition and help to "unify and integrate our literary experience."[31] The view that literature takes

shape in the recurrence of archetypes inevitably lays special emphasis on the importance of form and the constitutive role of conventions. As Frye puts it, "Poetry can only be made out of other poems; novels out of other novels. Literature shapes itself, and is not shaped externally: the *forms* of literature can no more exist outside literature than the forms of sonata and fugue and rondo can exist outside music."[32] In very much the same terms, Wilde talks about form and convention. He insists that art finds its perfection within, not outside itself, depending on the structural power of form: "Hers are the 'forms more real than living man,' and hers the great archetypes of which things that have existence are but unfinished copies" (31). It is with form that literature begins, and it is in the repetition of patterns and conventions that imagination operates, as imagination is "simply concentrated race-experience" (175). Form and convention, however, do not eliminate originality, for the making of literature is the working out of the dialectic relationship between convention and the departure from it, the speaking of a language at once conforming to and violating its grammar. "Each art has its grammar and its materials," observes Wilde, "but, while the laws upon which Art rests may be fixed and certain to find their true realization, they must be touched by the imagination into such beauty that they will seem an exception, each one of them" (205–06). It is surprising to find that these ideas in Wilde have so often been ignored, though they hardly contain anything at which critics now would raise their eyebrows. As Richard Ellman points out, in arguing for the independence of criticism, "Wilde sounds like an ancestral Northrop Frye or Roland Barthes," and it can be urged that "for his own reasons and in his own way he laid the basis for many critical positions which are still debated in much the same terms, and which we like to attribute to more ponderous names."[33]

The idea of creative criticism, with which Wilde's name is so firmly connected, is being taken seriously by some critics today who give it a sophisticated elaboration in the context of contemporary literary theory. Edward Said, for whom Vico provides a most important guide in philosophy, readily accepts Wilde's idea of criticism as independent creation. In a discussion of contemporary criticism as represented or misrepresented in anthologies, Said discovers that "critical discourse is still ensnared by a simplistic opposition between originality and repetition, in which all literary texts worth studying are given the former classification, the latter being logically confined mainly to criticism and to what isn't worth studying." The opposition is simplistic and therefore false because, first of all, it mistakes "the regularity of most literary production for originality, while insisting that the relation between 'literature' and criticism is one

of original to secondary," and then it overlooks "the profoundly important constitutive use of repetition" in the making of literature.[34] The critic understands the making of literature by tracing its genetic progress, by repeating the text from beginning to whole.

But the genetic hypotheses, Said emphasizes, "are not one-way referrals of 'a' work back to 'a' biography or society or whatever," but "include as part of the dialectic the critic's own shaping awareness of what he or she is doing."[35] Thus the critic is repeating the text in a way similar to the author's use of other texts as intertextual motifs and devices, and it is in this making or remaking as creation that true knowledge is obtained: "Only by reproducing can we know what was produced and what the meaning is of verbal production for a human being: this is the quintessential Vichian maxim. And it is no less valid for the literary critic for whom the genesis of a human work is as relevantly interesting as its being."[36] According to Said, it is Wilde and Nietzsche that first call our attention to the question of the role of criticism in the production of a literary work. In his study of the genesis or beginning of texts, Said points out the resemblance between "Nietzsche's division of Homer into two components" and "Oscar Wilde's fascination with the aesthetic powers of criticism to provide accurately inaccurate interpretations of creative energy," and he mentions Freud's Moses, Nietzsche's Dionysus or Zarathustra as examples of such "inaccurate interpretations" or powerful misreadings.[37]

This leads us naturally to Harold Bloom's idea of creative misreading or "misprision" which comprises and blends both reading and writing, both poetry and criticism: "The influence-relation governs reading as it governs writing, and reading is therefore a miswriting just as writing is a misreading. As literary history lengthens, all poetry necessarily becomes verse-criticism, just as all criticism becomes prose-poetry."[38] Bloom's "revisionistic poetics" is mainly concerned with the problem of what he calls the "anxiety of influence," the desperate effort of the creative energy to break through the influence of previous writings into the space of creation. "Poetic history," says Bloom, "is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves."[39] In Bloom's theory, the strong poet and the critic are not essentially different, since both are readers or misreaders wrestling with their strong precursors.

Bloom begins *The Anxiety of Influence* by citing Wilde as a perfect example of how devastating poetic influence can be, arguing that Wilde "had failed as a poet because he lacked strength to overcome his anxiety of influence" and demonstrating how that anxiety may

become a recurrent theme in the self-conscious bitterness of the poet, as Wilde talks about influence as "transference of personality" in *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, as a kind of immoral manipulation in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or self-deceptively denies the influence of his immediate precursor in his review of Pater's *Appreciations* by saying that Pater "has escaped disciples."[40] We may perhaps add yet another example from *The Critic as Artist*, where Gilbert suspects that Ernest has got his anticritical view from some older people and warns him that "that is a dangerous thing to do, and if you allow it to degenerate into a habit, you will find it absolutely fatal to any intellectual development" (109). As Ellman remarks, "Wilde's mode was calculated juvenescence, and the characters in his books are always being warned by shrewder characters of the danger of listening to people older than themselves."[41] For Wilde then, influence seems to be the power of an older and stronger personality that hinders and even cripples the development of personality of the younger, hence a power either to be shunned or countervailed. We may even say that the idea of criticism as striving to overcome the influence of another personality is implicit in Wilde's argument that "it is only by intensifying his own personality that the critic can interpret the personality and work of others, and the more strongly this personality enters into the interpretation the more real the interpretation becomes, the more satisfying, the more convincing, and the more true" (156).

Frank Lentricchia deftly shows how Bloom's career, which is a prolonged warfare with his New Critical father figures, "is itself a complicated example of the theory of influence."[42] There are also quite remarkable traces of Wilde's influence in his "revisionistic poetics." In his "Manifesto for Antithetical Criticism," Bloom sounds just like Wilde, and the resemblance is quite unmistakable both in theme and style. Bloom characterizes his own theory of poetry as "a severe poem, reliant upon aphorism, apothegm, and a quite personal (though thoroughly traditional) mythic pattern."[43] One may want to apply that characterization quite justifiably to Wilde's criticism as well, to those brilliant and witty dialogues and essays so richly inlaid with aphorisms and apothegms, so memorably quotable. In the hand of the creative critic, that is, the critic as artist as Wilde conceives, or the critic as Bloom's prose-poet, criticism becomes at once a discursive writing and a form of literary expression. And that, as we have seen in the many recent efforts to question the distinction between literary and the nonliterary use of language and the kind of quasi-literary discourse like Jacques Derrida's *Glas*, is precisely one of the points the deconstructionists like very much to press home.

It seems that Geoffrey Hartman has made the most perspicuous deconstructive pronouncement on this subject. He claims that his *Criticism in the Wilderness* is an attempt to bring together his reading of criticism with reading of literature, "to view criticism, in fact, as within literature, not outside of it looking in."[44] He raises questions to challenge the traditional subjugation of criticism as a secondary and derivative text and argues for the "creative or insubordinate quality" of critical writing: "Ask a philosopher what he does and he will answer 'philosophy.' It could be argued, in the same spirit, that what a literary critic does is literature."[45] According to him, one of the central issues that affect literary studies today and concern the deconstructionists in particular is "the situation of criticism itself," and the solution to that issue would be to reconsider the traditional attitude and to realize that "criticism is part of the world of letters, and has its own mixed philosophical and literary, reflective and figural strength."[46] It is no wonder that Hartman should find in Wilde a forerunner in this respect. After quoting Wilde's contemptuous remark on the silly vanity of those writers and artists who would have the critic accept as primary function to chatter about their second-rate work, Hartman says: "The English tradition in criticism is sublimated chatter; but it is also animated by its fierce ability to draw reputation into question. Even Shakespeare had once to be made safe; and Milton is restored, after Leavis, to his bad eminence. This power to alter reputations is formidable, and it shows that criticism has an unacknowledged penchant for reversal in it, which is near-daemonic and which brings it close to the primacy of art."[47] In the critical evaluation, or rather, devaluation of works of art, Hartman sees the power of criticism that is capable not only of creation but of reversal, of destruction, and, quite appositely, of deconstruction.

In deconstructive criticism as reversal, however, the idea of creative criticism is perhaps pushed in a direction Wilde may not have expected and may not endorse. While the deconstructive critic takes great pains to pull the text apart by exposing its fissures or internal inconsistencies, Wilde's aesthetic critic is much more interested in the pleasure of the text, the enjoyment of the beautiful. As Wilde says in the preface to *Dorian Gray*, art is beautiful, and "those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope." One of the advantages the critic has over the artist, as Wilde specifies it, lies precisely in the catholicity of artistic tastes because, while the artist's taste is limited, "the aesthetic critic, and the aesthetic critic alone, can appreciate all forms and modes" (206). It is this catholicity of artistic temperament, the true spirit of cosmopolitanism, Wilde argues, that makes the aesthetic critic the superb preserver of culture.

In his emphasis on impression, subjectivity, artistic temperament, and personality, Wilde's critical theory is not characterized by well-balanced reasoning or scrupulous scholarship. But a cool and unspirited objectivity is neither his style nor his ideal. He regards preconceptions as the very condition of criticism: "One should, of course, have no prejudice; but, as a great Frenchman remarked a hundred years ago, it is one's business in such matters to have preferences, and when one has preferences one ceases to be fair. It is only an auctioneer who can equally and impartially admire all schools of Art" (189). Here Wilde is coming to an important truth, so often ignored outside of the humanities because it does not conform to the ideal of objectivity; namely, the truth that our understanding and appreciation are never impersonally objective, but always colored by tradition or our conscious rebellion against it, by social and historical conditions, personal taste, cultivation, and so on; that we never read a book with a blank mind, but always with a set of rules, principles, and conventions as *fore*-understanding. Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical rehabilitation of *das Vorurteil* most powerfully demonstrates that "the prejudice against prejudice" is merely a prejudice in itself, a fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment.[48]

However, without the support of profound philosophical reasoning, Wilde's argument seems more witty than substantial, bending, as it were, deliberately on a kind of shocking sensationalism. It did more to bewilder and amuse his contemporaries than to convince and enlighten them. "I throw probability out of the window for the sake of a phrase," Wilde confessed to Arthur Conan Doyle, "and the chance of an epigram makes me desert truth."[49] But that confession itself reads suspiciously like an epigram, and we feel we have to read all of Wilde with a conscious effort to see what is going on underneath, or within, his highly polished, sparkling language. To read Wilde is never to read literally but to be sensitive to the workings of language. "Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods," says Wilde; "Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing" (144). His style of writing constantly invites doubt and rethinking and reveals the complexity and indeterminacy of literary language.

And yet, there is always something deeper than the mere play of language and the seemingly paradoxical in his paradox, something that comes from a deep seriousness. In his pursuit of paradoxes, maxims, and aphorisms, Wilde is, to quote what Ernest says of Gilbert, "quite incorrigible" (100). Therefore, it is quite easy to ignore his serious search for truth and his brilliant insight into the nature of art and criticism if we take them as a mere "patchwork affair or as a polished form of public entertainment."[50] We are liable to forget his emphasis on the self-culture of the critic, as "criticism demands

infinitely more cultivation than creation does" (126), or his perfectly sane and solid enumeration of the essentials of Shakespearean criticism, which includes practically everything a Shakespearean scholar should know (154–55). We are liable to neglect his theory by seeing only his wit, and this, as Beerbohm indicates, is simply a fallacy. "In point of fact," says Beerbohm, "wit was the least important of his gifts. Primarily, he was a poet, with a life-long passion for beauty; and a philosopher, with a life-long passion for thought. His wit, and his humour (which was of an even finer quality than his wit), sprang from a very solid basis of seriousness, as all good wit or humour must."[51]

To see Wilde as both a poet and a philosopher is to appreciate the graceful style of his writing that gives him an indisputable advantage over some of our contemporary critics whose a-bit-too-French French discourse can hardly ever match the ease and brilliance of Wilde's not-too-French French gestures. His aestheticism needs to be understood in its historical context, as a revolt against the kind of moralistic criticism we find in Arnold and Ruskin, and his creative criticism needs to be taken as a defense of the artistic temperament. After all, most original and insightful criticism is creative in precisely the way Wilde has described it; that is, it "fills with wonder a form which the artist may have left void, or not understood, or understood incompletely" (144). Pater's Mona Lisa may reveal more of Pater than of da Vinci or his painting, but we can hardly avoid its influence on the way we see and think about that painting. Goethe's Hamlet as a sensitive artist, Coleridge's as a melancholy philosopher, and even Freud's as a neurotic patient, are all valuable in one way or another, and a reading of the great Shakespearean play without awareness of all such interpretations would indeed miss a lot of the play itself. Creative criticism is thus a recognition of the richness and the excess of meaning in the great work of art. As Wilde puts it, "The aesthetic critic rejects those obvious modes of art that have but one message to deliver, and having delivered it become dumb and sterile, and seeks rather for such modes as suggest reverie and mood, and by their imaginative beauty make all interpretations true and no interpretation final" (148). Wilde's creative criticism, in other words, seeks to open the text of an artistic work and its inexhaustible meaning rather than close it once and for all with a seal of authority.

Yet Wilde's remarks will continue to irritate many people's sense of fairness, seriousness, or truthfulness. There are undoubtedly overstatements and exaggerations, bias, slant, and prejudice, but the essence of Wilde's critical thinking, the independence of Art and of Criticism as art, will endure as valuable insights which protect

art against the encroachment too often perpetrated by moral, political, or religious interests. All the rest is not essential; all the seemingly absurd extravaganzas come from the desire to achieve a striking effect, the need to make a strong point and drive it home. But if criticism is an art as Wilde argues, he has then already given the most effectiv defense for himself: "Art itself is really a form of exaggeration; and selection, which is the very spirit of art [and so also of criticism], is nothing more than an intensified mode of over-emphasis" (23).

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Notes

1. Sir Max Beerbohm, "A Lord of Language," Appendix C, in H. Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde: The Aftermath* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1963), 205.
2. Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 219.
3. Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde at Oxford* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1984), 5.
4. René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism, 1750–1950*, vol. 4: *The Later Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 408.
5. Ibid., 409.
6. Ibid.
7. Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," "The Critic as Artist," in *Intentions* (New York: Brentano's 1950), 5, 185. All further references to this edition will be included in the text.
8. Wellek, 413, 414.
9. René Wellek, "The Poet as Critic, the Critic as Poet, the Poet-Critic," in *Discriminations: Further Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 256.
10. René Wellek, "Destroying Literary Studies," *New Criterion* 2.4 (1983): 1–8.
11. Roger Shattuck, "Viva Voce: Criticism and the Teaching of Literature," in *What Is Criticism?* ed. Paul Harnadi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 99.
12. Wellek, "Destroying Literary Studies," 8.
13. Murray Krieger, "Criticism as a Secondary Art," in *What Is Criticism?* 280.
14. Ibid., 282.
15. Karlfried Froehlich, trans. and ed., *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1.
16. Wellek, *History of Modern Criticism*, 411.
17. Henri Peyre, *Writers and Their Critics: A Study of Misunderstanding* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1944), 228.
18. Eugenio Donato, "Historical Imagination and the Idioms of Criticism," *Boundary 2* 8 (Fall 1979): 52, 50.
19. Biambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, sec. 363, trans. Thomas G. Bergin and Max H. Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 110.

20. Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Forrest Robinson (Indianaposis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970(, 14.
21. Ibid., 57.
22. John Allen Quintus, "The Moral Implications of Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 22 (Winter 1980): 567.
23. William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York: Knopf, 1957), 495, 496.
24. Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 45, 46.
25. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 5.
26. William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 4.
27. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 4, 5.
28. Ibid., 6.
29. Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," in *Verbal Icon*, 21.
30. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 146.
31. Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 1; Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 99.
32. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 97.
33. Oscar Wilde, *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), introduction, x.
34. Edward W. Said, "Roads Taken and Not Taken in Contemporary Criticism," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 154.
35. Ibid., 156, 157.
36. Ibid., 157.
37. Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 58.
38. Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 3.
39. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 5.
40. Ibid., 5–6.
41. Ellmann, introduction, *Artist as Critic*, x.
42. Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 321.
43. Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 13.
44. Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 1.
45. Ibid., 9, 20.
46. Geoffrey H. Hartman, Preface *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et al. (New York: Continuum, 1984), vii.
47. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 199.
48. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Eng. trans. ed. B. Garden and J. Cumming (New York: Crossroad, 1975), 235ff.
49. Wilde, Letter to Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 291–92.
50. Epifanio San Juan, *The Art of Oscar Wilde* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 74.
51. Beerbohm, "A Lord of Language," 205.